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SUBJECT: 20,000 MUSLIM WOMEN RUNNING FOR ELECTION IN MOROCCO

REF: RABAT 0473

11. (SBU) Summary: The June 12th municipal elections will be a landmark in women's participation in Moroccan political life, and the effects of the government's decision to reserve seats for female candidates are already being felt in society. An astounding 20,000 women are poised to run in the elections, likely rocketing the share of female elected officials above 12 percent of the total (from its current 0.5 percent). Women's places on party tickets (like their male counterparts,) are brokered in backroom deals, but some women are fighting this. Reftel describes the high-impact, short-term USG program that trained some 4,000 women candidates around the country. This message conveys the reactions of women candidates and looks at some of the effects of their entry into Moroccan politics. The major increase in women's political participation at the local level comes at a time when the Government has announced plans to decentralize authority, putting more power than ever in the hands of those elected this June. This appears to reflect the Palace's belief that the advancement of women's rights represents "the cornerstone" of Morocco's strategy of building a modern democratic society. End Summary.

Background

12. (SBU) In December 2008, the Government of Morocco (GOM) announced that 12 percent of seats in the June municipal elections would be reserved for women, who now hold less than 0.5 percent of elected municipal positions. The move will dramatically increase the presence of women in town and city councils, overseeing local services such as water, electricity, sanitation, public transportation and economic development. Communal elections also serve as the first step in a chain of indirect elections that fill successively higher seats of government, ultimately leading to seats in Parliament's upper house.

13. (SBU) Hassan Aghmari, Director of Elections at the Ministry of Interior (MOI), announced on June 1 that over 20,000 women have registered as candidates in the upcoming communal elections. One-fourth of those women will run on general party lists while the rest will run on the dedicated women's list. Although youth in Morocco have generally soured on voting and elections in general, more than half of the women currently running are under the age of 35. A majority of the female candidates also have secondary or higher education degrees, according to the GOM.

Political Parties Seek Qualified, Electable Women

14. (SBU) This sudden opportunity to pick up additional

seats, and thus greater influence, has caused a feeding frenzy among Morocco's numerous political parties, as each seeks to recruit the most electable women to run on their lists. During training sessions by the International Republican Institute and National Democratic Institute aimed at teaching first-time female candidates how to run and win a campaign (Reftel), trainers reported "headhunters" appearing at gatherings of rival parties attempting to coax women candidates to their party's list. One female embassy contact reported offers from four different political parties to run as a candidate. Asked whether she had accepted any of the offers, she said she had declined all of them because the increased encouragement for women in politics has inspired her to skip the municipal elections and run for Parliament in 2012.

Not Just Decorations

15. (SBU) Fatima El Maghnaoui, a long-time activist with the Socialist Union of Popular Forces (USFP), who is running for office for the first time, illustrated the continuing challenges for women, despite the current initiatives. Lambasting the "patriarchal mentality" of the political parties, she explained that the parties are trying to keep women on the women's lists so that the men can protect their own seats by placing themselves at the head of the party lists. El Maghnaoui described the questionable deals regarding placement on the party lists brokered by party leaders (who are men) in bars or in the men's room, without the input of the women candidates. "As if we could, or would, go to either of these places!" she scoffed.

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16. (SBU) She and other women candidates launched a campaign of lobbying their own political parties to create a more open and objective system for determining placement on the party lists. "If they do allow us to get onto the party list, they give us meaningless positions on the bottom," reducing the likelihood of winning a seat. In that case, "we are nothing more than decorations," she observed.

17. (SBU) Fatiha Saddas, another candidate with the USFP, noted that many women who had originally intended to run retracted their candidacies at the last minute. She said that women candidates were finding it too difficult to have a job, run a household and be politically active. "Political party meetings are held after working hours," she explained, noting that although she has a progressive husband, "when I come home late, my husband starts complaining." In Morocco, a man does not have the same kind of pressure because he is not expected to take care of the home in addition to his other activities, she stated.

Playing Hard to Get

18. (SBU) Despite the challenges, as parties get more desperate for qualified, electable women to run on their tickets, female candidates find themselves the object of attention of numerous political parties. This high demand has increased their bargaining position and allowed them to win greater concessions. For example, despite the availability of a dedicated women's list, many women have used this opportunity to lobby hard for a top position on the party lists instead. Election off the party list is a way to demonstrate political clout, and refutes the idea that women were elected only because they had their own list and not on their own merits. Women candidates have successfully earned spots on party lists by threatening to defect to another party, and take other women with them. As party loyalty is non-existent in Morocco, with voters supporting individuals rather than parties, this has been a particularly effective

strategy.

¶9. (SBU) Fatima El Maghnaoui, who had earlier chastised her own party for not supporting women, told PolOff on May 28 that the lobbying had paid off. She now holds the number two spot on the national USFP party list. In addition to the USFP, the Party of Progress and Socialism (PPS), Party of Authenticity and Modernity (PAM) and the Popular Movement (MP) have all given women top spots on their party lists in some districts. A woman heads the Party of Justice and Development (PJD) list in Tangier where the PJD is running a highly organized, targeted campaign to attract women candidates and subsequently votes. The presence of women on both sets of lists could ensure that even more than 12 percent of those elected in June are women, an outcome predicted by both the National Democratic Institute and the International Republican Institute.

Why It Matters

¶10. (SBU) The decision to dramatically increase the number of women in local governance comes at a time when the central government is actively trying to devolve responsibilities to the communal and city levels. According to Rachid Rguibi, Governor in Charge of International Cooperation at the MOI, decentralization is a major objective of the Palace. "We want to give the regions enough power to function independently," he said, although the MOI also wants the authority of its own local cadre to grow. Involving more women in local governance at this time appears to reflect the GOM's belief, at the highest levels, that women must be active participants in Morocco's modernization and political evolution.

Comment

¶11. (SBU) The social and political implications of this election are significant. After June 12, at least 12 percent of Morocco's local leadership will be female. Indications are that the actual number could be slightly higher than this. Female elected officials will no longer be rare curiosities in Moroccan politics but will be part of the political establishment from the ministerial level to the smallest communal council. More importantly, the active

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encouragement of women's participation has mobilized a population of younger, educated women candidates to play a role in the management of local affairs, a hopeful start in reversing the jaded disenchantment with electoral politics that had been gaining in recent years. End Comment.

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